



**Lutheran
Social Services
of Michigan**

*Serving people as an expression
of the love of Christ*

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TESTIMONY OF
DONALD AUSTIN, ASSOC. VICE PRESIDENT-CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES
LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF MICHIGAN
TO
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FAMILY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

JUNE 8, 2005

Mr. Chairman Stahl and committee members, my name is Donald Austin. I am Associate Vice President for Child and Family Services at Lutheran Social Services of Michigan. Thank you for this opportunity to share with you our observations and experiences with the "Family to Family" model of services being developed by the Michigan Department of Human Services.

➤ Family to Family is a good model for services to Michigan families.

- 1) It empowers them to take responsibility for their children.
- 2) It makes them part of the decision making regarding their case planning. It holds true to the idea that families should be able to say: "No decisions about me, without me."
- 3) It promotes their strengths, rather than their weaknesses and failures. It uses those to help overcome the behaviors and barriers that put children at risk and place them in the child welfare system.
- 4) It involves extended family and the community to marshal resources that provide support and assistance.

➤ Family to Family is good for Michigan children.

- 1) It places the emphasis on preserving family ties through relative care, and keeping children with their families whenever possible. Relative care is central to the model, and can be the best choice for children when such placements are properly screened and supervised.
- 2) It emphasizes child and family ties to the local community (e.g. school, church, etc.). If children need to be placed in foster care, it helps keep them as close to home and friends as possible.
- 3) If the child is old enough, the process of decision making can also involve them and help meet needs important to them.

➤ Family to Family is, however, no panacea. Like anything, it is to be used cautiously and as needed.

- 1) Not all families can, or should, stay together – especially when dysfunctional problems threaten the health and safety of vulnerable children.
- 2) If a child is damaged by substance abuse or sexual abuse, as are common in the child welfare system, then society has a duty to protect, and to make every effort to promote healing for that child away from the people and environment that caused the abuse.



- 3) Many times children cannot be reunited with their families, and should be placed in foster care, and eventually adopted. We must always abide by the key child welfare principle of "serving the child's best interest."
- Family to Family promotes placing children with relatives whenever possible. This can be best for a child in some instances. However, we must again emphasize caution about such efforts.
 - 1) We believe that public human services and court systems are currently placing children with relatives far too often in preference to foster family care. Relative placement is not always the answer. Our public systems should use consistent criteria for placement of children with relatives and families.
 - 2) Relative homes are not subject to the same state criteria for licensing that foster families are (unless the relative home can be licensed). If they cannot meet such basic standards for the welfare of children as recognized by our public laws and regulations, then we continue to put the child at risk. Relative placements should be subject to the same rules and regulations as foster families. For if they are not, they cannot be eligible to adopt the child under Michigan law.
 - 3) Relative placements are typically not monitored after once the child is placed. This means that those children do not receive ongoing supervision to help ensure their safety. Also, they no longer receive access to public and community resources that may be essential to providing a safe and stable home for the child. Relative placements should be carefully screened, monitored and supervised on an extended basis. We propose one year, which would be consistent with supervision in an adoptive placement.
 - Working with the Casey Foundation has been interesting and helpful in furthering the betterment of the process of improving Michigan's child welfare system. We very much appreciate the many investments they have made. There are, however, some important caveats to this model.
 - 1) Casey promotes a public provider model, which tends to ignore the fact that 60 percent of the children in foster care in Michigan are in the care of private agencies. In Wayne County, private agencies provide nearly 80 percent of foster care services to vulnerable children and youth. Private providers must be full partners in this effort.
 - 2) Casey only initially invested money in private sector services when they piloted Family to Family with Lutheran Social Services' Wayne County program over four years ago. Since then, LSSM has funded the start-up of Family to Family in Wayne County. Our agency has been fully subsidizing the continuance of the Family to Family model in our Wayne County services at a cost of nearly \$100,000 a year in resources including a full-time facilitator, and at least six other staff regularly involved in meetings. We cannot continue such subsidization much longer. We need ongoing funding.
 - 3) If Family to Family is to truly work in Michigan, the State must decide to both provide financial support and to replicate the Family to Family model of services within private agencies.

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you our perspective on the Family to Family model. I would be happy to respond to any questions from you Mr. Chairman or committee members.

Lutheran Social Services of Michigan exists to "Serve people as an expression of the love of Christ." Our vision is to "create a community that upholds human dignity, decries complacency and affords equality and justice.